



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Best NATO Is a Dormant NATO

Less Reliance on America Would Yield a Stronger Alliance and a Safer Europe

BY SUMANTRA MAITRA November 4, 2024

SUMANTRA MAITRA is an Elected Associate Fellow at the Royal Historical Society and the author of *The Sources of Russian Aggression*.

In “Planning for a Post-American NATO,” Phillips P. O’Brien and Edward Stringer attempt to address the security vacuum they foresee resulting from a second Trump administration. They highlight, in particular, my proposal for a “dormant NATO,” in which I lay out an organizational framework where the United States would remove its ground forces from the Europe in order to shift the burden of defending the continent away from Washington and toward the region’s own governments. According to O’Brien and Stringer, a dormant NATO could quickly become a dead NATO, because the alliance would struggle to survive unless the United States clearly displays an overwhelming commitment to Europe. Without that commitment, the authors argue, older divisions will return, with central and eastern Europe turning more hawkish while northern and western Europe

continue to free ride on Washington. “A European security alliance,” they write, “could collapse under the weight of such incompatible outlooks.”

O’Brien and Stringer are incorrect in their assessment of my proposal. A dormant NATO is not a devastating retrenchment from Europe. Instead, it is predicated on three correct assumptions: that structural forces will push the United States to prioritize Asia over Europe, that continued expansion of NATO dilutes NATO’s core geographical interests and transforms a defensive alliance to an ideological one, and that western European free-riding is a result of an overwhelming American presence. Under my system, the United States would still backstop the continent’s security by providing a nuclear umbrella and deploying its naval resources. The proposal never calls for a total retrenchment. What it does call for is a better and fairer distribution of labor, where Washington shifts the burden of logistics, armor, and infantry to affluent western European powers.

But more important, O’Brien and Stringer are wrong about European security in general. The authors argue that NATO could survive a U.S. withdrawal if it reshuffles its leadership and unifies. They argue, specifically, that the continent should hand over NATO’s military command to an eastern European state, such as Poland, and develop a joint nuclear deterrent. But their proposals ignore the central puzzle that they explicitly put to themselves: Europe’s strategic incoherence. They fail to accept that the continent’s “incompatible outlooks” are not the product of bad design but the result of geography, culture, threat perceptions, offensive capabilities, industrial power, and a whole array of other variables. Such differences are irreconcilable. There can be no coherent European security alliance without Washington because there is no united Europe, nor has there ever been.

Instead, Europe is an artificial entity, one made up of states that have very different interests. It is only sensible, for example, that Germany and the Netherlands are less invested in helping Ukraine than Estonia or Poland because each of these states' defense priorities depends on its geographic distance from Russia—and the former two countries are much farther away than the latter. The shared European security architecture is, by contrast, unnatural. It is propped up by American hegemony, which has prompted Europe's traditional great powers to spend less on their militaries than they otherwise would, as well as discouraged traditional nationalist violence in the continent. To envision European unity without the United States—as the authors attempt to do—is therefore absurd.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS

O'Brien and Stringer try to address, in a practical way, the hard security questions Europe would face if abandoned by Washington. They weigh the resources and ideologies of the continent's biggest states to determine which one might be the best leader. Eventually, they reach the conclusion that France, Germany, and the United Kingdom are all incapable of leading the continent—but that Poland might be, given the country's recent rearmament. They also argue that Europe would need to consider establishing a continent-wide nuclear deterrent. In the near term, they propose that London and Paris could offer such a shield by giving other European states some power over their launch protocols. In the long term, they argue that the continent should create a nuclear arsenal that is jointly owned.

These ideas might make for a good academic discussion, but they are unrealistic. Consider the nuclear issue first. The idea that France or the United Kingdom would allow another state—let alone some unelected bureaucrat in the European Union—to dictate their nuclear postures is

fanciful. So is the idea that European countries would coordinate to develop a shared nuclear arsenal.

Relatedly, the authors' assertion that France, Germany, and the United Kingdom will consent to a united foreign policy direction defies logic: great-power peace in Europe is due to an overwhelming Pax Americana, not because its countries have suddenly become benevolent. Even if Europe's greatest powers are now inherently more peaceful, it is unlikely that the continent's three most populous states would forego their competing strategic and economic interests and agree to be led by a hawkish and paranoid eastern European country that is far less powerful, financially or materially, than any of them.

O'Brien and Stringer appear to thus misunderstand European history. NATO's job for over 70 years has not just been to defend Europe. It has also been to temper the European national outbursts that helped produce two world wars, in part by making it impossible for any country to dominate others. The only plausible way Europe can achieve what the authors lay out is by turning the European Union into a supranational empire, with all the resultant repressions that come from creating such an entity. By centralizing Europe from a federalized trade bloc into a formal imperial state, policymakers would naturally encourage and foster centrifugal social forces. These forces would, in turn, initiate a cycle of political and economic repression and erode democratic rights—as has happened in the past.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Fortunately, there is a moderate option for a new European strategic architecture, one that avoids a total U.S. withdrawal but does not stretch Washington to the point of insolvency. Instead of trying to provide security for a continent which is mostly at peace and rich enough to fund its own

defense, the United States can act as an offshore balancer. Washington will no longer aspire for primacy in the European theater. Instead, it will allow for a European rearmament and, subsequently, European burden sharing. It will remove soldiers and equipment from Europe and allow western European states to return to a pre-1990 force posture. But the United States will continue to provide an overarching nuclear umbrella to NATO members and discourage nuclear proliferation on the continent, a core American aim for over half a century. Its formidable Second Fleet would protect sea routes, support the continent's major naval powers, and continue to provide extended deterrence—satiating Europeans who are afraid of abandonment at a time of Russian revanchism.

This approach, unlike O'Brien and Stringer's, is rooted in reality. It acknowledges that not all states will face similar threats, and that if a distant hegemon provides total security, the chances of free riding increase among states that are distant from their primary rival power. Additionally, the bigger an alliance, the more equal all states become regardless of their size and contribution, making the relative power of the hegemonic protector decline. Neither of these forces are beneficial to Washington.

A dormant NATO addresses these dilemmas. It keeps the United States tied to the continent, checks nuclear proliferation, and keeps nationalistic and imperialistic urges down among European powers. It restrains populism on both sides of the Atlantic with more equitable defense spending and provides security to European states that cannot, for historical reasons, trust their fellow European powers. But it still forces western Europe to do more to protect the continent than the region does right now. The simple fact is that France, Germany, and other western European states will never seriously invest in their militaries until they can no longer free ride off the

United States for protection. They need Washington to partially pull back before they will better coordinate with central and eastern Europe.

Europeans will certainly grouse about a partial U.S. retrenchment. But ultimately, a dormant NATO would benefit all its members. If Europe better shares the burden of logistics, armor, intelligence, and infantry, the United States will have an easier time guaranteeing European peace and unity with its overbearing nuclear and naval might. And NATO would finally become closed, minimalist, and defensive—as its founders originally intended.

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